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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP,NEA/PI, DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KMPI](#) [KWMN](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: FEMALE CANDIDATES ANALYZE 2007 ELECTORAL LOSSES

REF: 07 MUSCAT 1026

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) Summary: Six months after Oman's most recent Majlis al-Shura elections, contacts continue to offer various reasons why women failed to win a seat in Oman's directly-elected advisory body. While many chalk up women's electoral losses to inexperience and poor campaigning, others point to a lack of support among civil society and a cultural bias against women in leadership positions as major contributing factors. Some of the female candidates are discussing possible long-term approaches to increasing women's involvement in the political sphere, which might provide opportunities for USG support. End summary.

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Background
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12. (C) During October 2007 elections for all 84 seats in Oman's Majlis al-Shura, the directly-elected lower chamber of Oman's bicameral advisory body, none of the 20 female candidates, two of whom were incumbents, won their campaigns (reftel). The poor showing by women in the elections was a source of national embarrassment; in November, the Sultan appointed 14 women to the Majlis al-Dawla, the upper house of Oman's proto-legislature. Contacts state, however, that the loss of Shura representation was seen by many as a setback for women in Oman, and some community leaders continue to question why women failed to win a seat.

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Were Candidates to Blame?
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13. (C) Many contacts, including some of the female candidates themselves, suggest that women lost because they ran poor campaigns. Kamilia al-Busaidy - a lawyer with the firm of Trowers & Hamlin who ran as a first-time candidate in the Muttrah wilayaat (district) near Muscat - admitted to poloff that her campaign was weak and got off to a slow start. She enrolled as a candidate on the last day of the registration period, for instance, and told few in the community of her intention to run. (Note: In comparison, some male candidates reportedly began meeting with local sheikhs to shore up support for their candidacies as much as three-years in advance. End note.) While she placed campaign ads in the newspapers, she did little direct voter outreach. Al-Busaidy lamented that many of the people who did express an interest in supporting her often were unregistered first-time voters who learned of her candidacy after the voter registration deadline had passed. By the time she began to develop name recognition among the electorate, she said, it was too late to affect the outcome.

14. (C) Barka al-Bakry, the head of a non-governmental

organization in Muscat, bluntly told poloff that Busaidy was not ready to run in 2007 and should have taken more time to develop her campaign skills, learn community issues, and introduce herself to individual voters and leaders before announcing her candidacy. However, Aziza al-Habsi, a candidate from Seeb, another Muscat-area district, dismissed the idea that women lost primarily due to poor campaigning or lack of readiness. Al-Habsi told poloff that she campaigned actively to develop a wide base of support. She spoke to voters about issues such as jobs and the economy, she claimed, and promised that she would be an advocate for Seeb in the Majlis al-Shura. She campaigned door-to-door in Seeb neighborhoods and visited workers in the Rusayl industrial area, which borders Seeb, in order to meet as many prospective voters as she could at one time.

¶5. (C) Al-Habsi was one of 16 candidates running for two positions to represent Seeb. She came in fifth place, she said, with 210 votes out of a total of approximately 3,000 votes cast. The top vote recipient took more than 1,800 votes alone, and the next four candidates split most of the remaining ballots. The eventual second place candidate was from a large family in Seeb and reportedly received substantial support from his tribal base. While admitting room for improvement, al-Habsi felt that she had run an effective campaign. "The men who won (in my district) didn't do any more campaigning than I did," she told poloff.

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No Role for Women's Associations
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¶6. (C) Both al-Busaidy and al-Habsi commented that they had little success in organizing support for their campaigns

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among female voters. While al-Habsi felt that university educated women may have voted for her, she claimed that less educated women tended to vote as their husbands instructed. She often appealed to women voters through their husbands, she said, and tried to time her house calls when a man was at home. The two former candidates also stated that they had hoped that the Oman Women's Associations (OWAs), which act as a focal point for women's social activities in many communities, would provide a base of support for their candidacies. However, the OWAs gave little to no assistance in introducing them or their message to female voters. (Note: Contacts indicate that the Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) prohibited the OWAs from playing a visible role in the elections to avoid perceptions that the associations were supporting individual candidates. End note.) Without OWA involvement, women candidates lacked a natural venue for their campaign events - a severe disadvantage, they claimed, because it was socially acceptable for their male competitors to reach prospective voters through their local mosques.

¶7. (C) Al-Habsi told poloff that she heard after the election that only six women of the Seeb OWA's total membership of more than 200 participated in the election - all six cast their votes for Aziza. "Even just a few more of those 200 votes (from the rest of the OWA membership) could have given me the victory," she complained. Al-Busaidy said that she raised the OWAs' lack of involvement in the Shura election directly with the Minister of Social Development in a post-election debrief with other female candidates. "The Sultan has given us (the right to vote and hold elected office)," she explained to poloff later, "and OWAs need to help women take advantage of it."

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A Failure of Civil Society...
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¶8. (C) Some community leaders suggest that the OWAs' lack of support for female candidates was simply part of a larger

failure of civil society to support women. In a January 21, 2008 appearance on the cable channel "Al Hura" with Arab women parliamentarians, Tayba al-Ma'wali, a human rights activist and former member of the Majlis al-Shura who was jailed in 2005 for comments she made about a government official, suggested that Omanis still relegate women to the margins of political life. She was dismissive of OWAs - "How can we say that the associations are indicative of women's active role in society? There are 52 associations (in Oman) and yet no women were elected to the Majlis" - and asserted that none of Oman's writers, intellectuals or recognized community leaders voiced support for women at any time during the election. A broad range of civil society needs to "accept women leaders" before women can truly integrate themselves into political life, she said. (Note: In an April 14 interview in the private Omani Arabic daily "Shabiba," al-Ma'wali clarified her comments, saying that she "did not insult the country on 'Al Hura'." End note.)

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... and Cultural Bias
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¶9. (C) Some contacts agree with al-Ma'wali that despite the high-visibility appointments of women to ministerial and ambassadorial positions in the Omani government, there still is a cultural bias against women in positions of authority. Women often are expected to operate in a separate social sphere, some women state, which limits their opportunities to interface with men and acts as a barrier to political involvement. One young, professional Omani woman who works for the company Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) told poloff that during a recent conference in Oman, organizers asked her to move to a section dedicated for women after she attempted to sit with male participants. The ten women in attendance "sat, talked, and ate together," and had no meaningful interaction with their male colleagues. While al-Habsi apparently felt comfortable campaigning door-to-door among men, other candidates reportedly felt that soliciting male support for their candidacies was inappropriate and against Oman's established social norms. The young women at PDO told poloff that women have to find a way to "break out of this box" and learn to network among men; only then can they hope to do well in future Shura elections.

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Comment
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¶10. (C) Based on their experiences in the October 2007 elections, Omani women are looking for practical, long-term

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approaches that could prove effective in increasing women's political involvement. The Seeb OWA - which al-Habsi currently runs as its chairperson - is hosting a women's legal rights seminar on May 26. Helping women understand the law is a step toward engaging women in the political process, and the seminar could provide a model for similar activities in other OWAs. Al-Busaidy was struck by how few Omanis, particularly young people, knew about the Majlis al-Shura or their government, and told the Minister of Social Development that there needs to be more civics and government courses in Oman's schools. By encouraging children to think about voting and governance at an early age, schools could help create a new generation of female candidates and a culture of civic awareness that would help counter cultural biases against women as leaders.

¶11. (SBU) A senior official has indicated that the government is interested in possible U.S. assistance in conducting campaign training for women candidates before the next Majlis al-Shura elections scheduled for 2011. Post will actively follow-up on this potential opportunity as it works with the Ministry of Social Development to design a new MEPI-funded women's empowerment program. Post will also continue to use

MEPI local grants, including grants for projects with individual OWA chapters, to support homegrown efforts to advance women's participation in society. End comment.
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